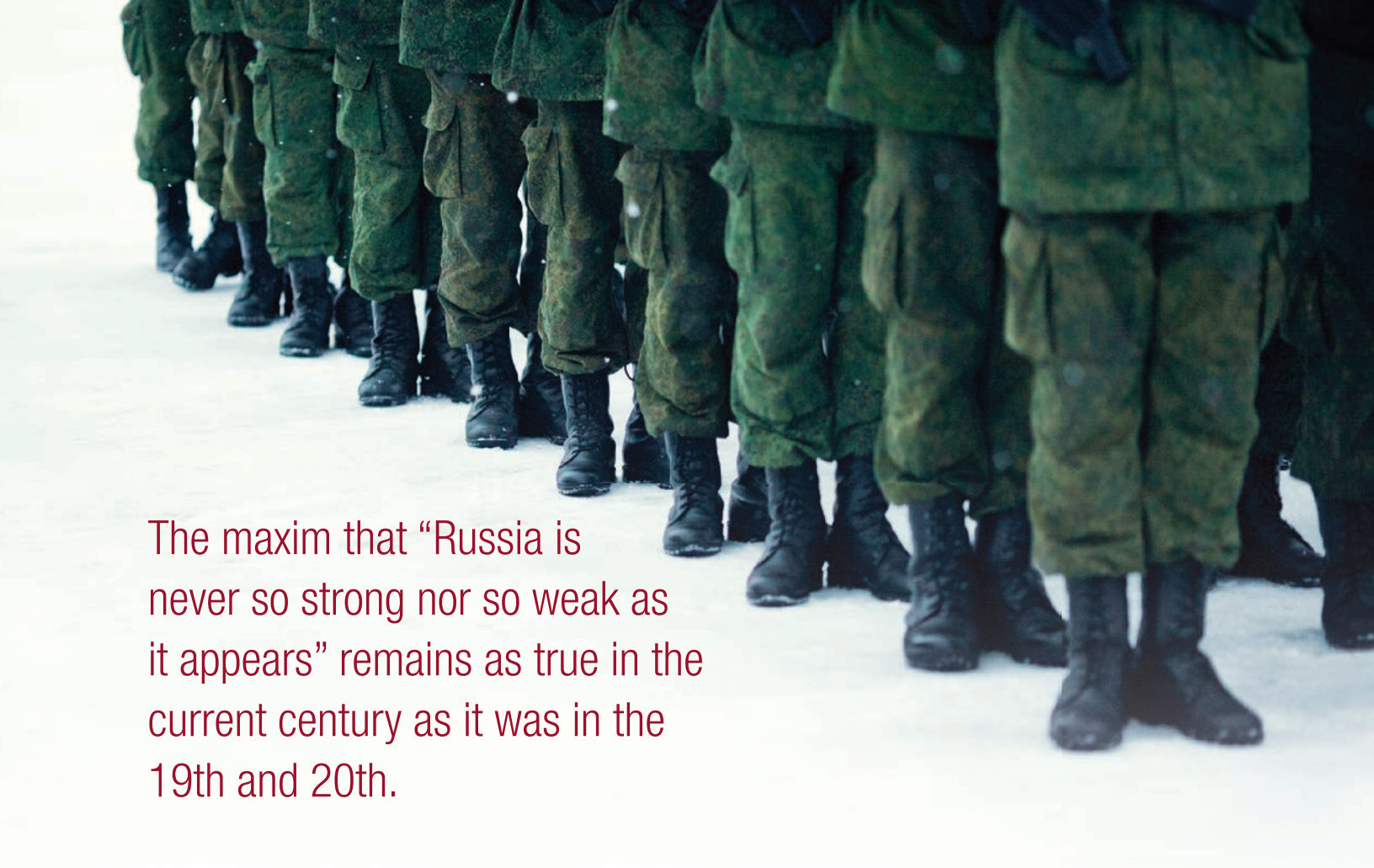
BRIEF

Overextending and Unbalancing Russia

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COST-IMPOSING OPTIONS

This brief summarizes a report that comprehensively examines nonviolent, cost-imposing options that the United States and its allies could pursue across economic, political, and military areas to stress—overextend and unbalance—Russia's economy and armed forces and the regime's political standing at home and abroad. Some of the options examined are clearly more promising than others, but any would need to be evaluated in terms of the overall U.S. strategy for dealing with Russia, which neither the report nor this brief has attempted to do.



The maxim that "Russia is never so strong nor so weak as it appears" remains as true in the current century as it was in the 19th and 20th.

Today's Russia suffers from many *vulnerabilities*—oil and gas prices well below peak that have caused a drop in living standards, economic sanctions that have furthered that decline, an aging and soon-to-be-declining population, and increasing authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin's now-continued rule. Such vulnerabilities are coupled with deep-seated (if exaggerated) *anxieties* about the possibility of Western-inspired regime change, loss of great power status, and even military attack.

Despite these vulnerabilities and anxieties, Russia remains a powerful country that still manages to be a U.S. peer competitor in a few key domains. Recognizing that some level of competition with Russia is inevitable, RAND researchers conducted a qualitative assessment of "cost-imposing options" that could unbalance and overextend Russia. Such cost-imposing options could place new burdens on Russia, ideally heavier burdens than would be imposed on the United States for pursuing those options.

The work builds on the concept of long-term strategic competition developed during the Cold War, some of which originated at RAND. A seminal 1972 RAND report posited that the United States needed to shift its strategic thinking away from trying to stay ahead of the Soviet Union in all dimensions and toward trying to control the competition and channel it into areas of U.S. advantage. If this shift could be made successfully, the report concluded, the United States could prompt the Soviet Union to shift its limited resources into areas that posed less of a threat.

The new report applies this concept to today's Russia. A team of RAND experts developed economic, geopolitical, ideological, informational, and military options and qualitatively assessed them in terms of their likelihood of success in extending Russia, their benefits, and their risks and costs.

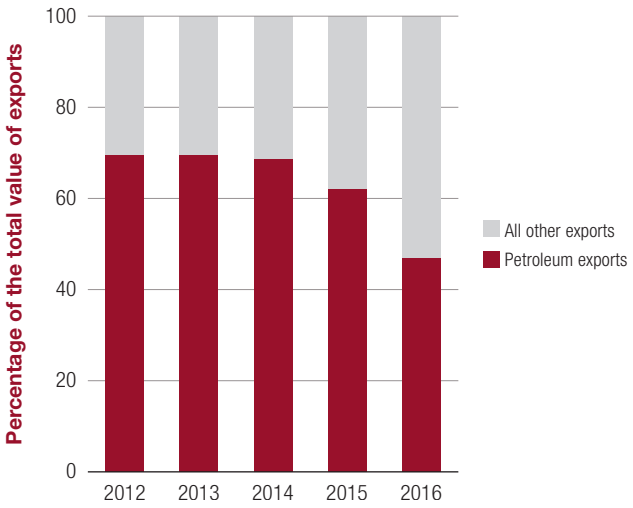
ECONOMIC COST-IMPOSING MEASURES

Expanding U.S. energy production would stress Russia's economy, potentially constraining its government budget and, by extension, its defense spending. By adopting policies that expand world supply and depress global prices, the United States can limit Russian revenue. Doing so entails little cost or risk, produces second-order benefits for the U.S. economy, and does not need multilateral endorsement.

Imposing deeper trade and financial sanctions would also likely degrade the Russian economy, especially if such sanctions are comprehensive and multilateral. Thus, their effectiveness will depend on the willingness of other countries to join in such a process. But sanctions come with costs and, depending on their severity, considerable risks.

Increasing Europe's ability to import gas from suppliers other than Russia could economically extend Russia and buffer Europe against Russian energy coercion. Europe is slowly moving in this direction by building regasification plants for liquefied natural gas (LNG). But to be truly effective, this option would need global LNG markets to become more flexible than they already are and would need LNG to become more price-competitive with Russian gas.

Russian petroleum exports are declining



SOURCE: United Nations (UN), *UN Comtrade Database*, electronic online database, 2017.

Encouraging the emigration from Russia of skilled labor and well-educated youth has few costs or risks and could help the United States and other receiving countries and hurt Russia, but any effects—both positive for receiving countries and negative for Russia—would be difficult to notice except over a very long period. This option also has a low likelihood of extending Russia.

Economic Cost-Imposing Options	Likelihood of Success in Extending Russia	Benefits	Costs and Risks
Expand U.S. energy production	High	High	Low
Impose deeper trade and financial sanctions	High	High	High
Increase Europe's ability to import LNG from sources other than Russia	Moderate	High	Moderate
Encourage emigration from Russia of skilled labor and well-educated youth	Low	Low	Low

NOTE: For all the tables in this brief, high and low rankings for costs and risks are inverted in desirability from the rest of the table; i.e., low costs are good in the same way that a high likelihood of success is. Thus, a low cost is shaded in green while a low likelihood of success is shaded in red. All assessments listed in the tables in this brief are based on analysis by the report's authors.

GEOPOLITICAL COST-IMPOSING MEASURES

Providing lethal aid to Ukraine would exploit Russia's greatest point of external vulnerability. But any increase in U.S. military arms and advice to Ukraine would need to be carefully calibrated to increase the costs to Russia of sustaining its existing commitment without provoking a much wider conflict in which Russia, by reason of proximity, would have significant advantages.

Increasing support to the Syrian rebels could jeopardize other U.S. policy priorities, such as combating radical Islamic terrorism, and could risk further destabilizing the entire region. Furthermore, this option might not even be feasible, given the radicalization, fragmentation, and decline of the Syrian opposition.

Promoting liberalization in Belarus likely would not succeed and could provoke a strong Russian response, one that would result in a general deterioration of the security environment in Europe and a setback for U.S. policy.

Syrian Democratic Forces trainees, representing an equal number of Arab and Kurdish volunteers, stand in formation at their graduation ceremony in northern Syria, August 9, 2017.

Expanding ties in the South Caucasus—competing economically with Russia—would be difficult because of geography and history.

Reducing Russian influence in Central Asia would be very difficult and could prove costly. Increased engagement is unlikely to extend Russia much economically and likely to be disproportionately costly for the United States.

Flip Transnistria and expel the Russian troops from the region would be a blow to Russian prestige, but it would also save Moscow money and quite possibly impose additional costs on the United States and its allies.

Geopolitical Cost-Imposing Options	Likelihood of Success in Extending Russia	Benefits	Costs and Risks
Provide lethal aid to Ukraine	Moderate	High	High
Increase support to the Syrian rebels	Low	Moderate	High
Promote liberalization in Belarus	Low	High	High
Expand ties in the South Caucasus	Low	Low	Moderate
Reduce Russian influence in Central Asia	Low	Low	Moderate
Flipping Transnistria	Low	Low	Moderate

IDEOLOGICAL AND INFORMATIONAL COST-IMPOSING MEASURES

Diminishing faith in the Russian electoral system would be difficult because of state control over most media sources. Doing so could increase discontent with the regime, but there are serious risks that the Kremlin could increase repression or lash out and pursue a diversionary conflict abroad that might run counter to Western interests.

Creating the perception that the regime is not pursuing the public interest could focus on widespread, large-scale corruption and further challenge the legitimacy of the state. But it is hard to assess whether political volatility and protests would lead to a more extended Russia—less able or inclined to threaten Western interests abroad—or to a Russia more inclined to lash out in retaliation or to distract, making this a high-risk option.

Encouraging domestic protests and other nonviolent resistance would focus on distracting or destabilizing the Russian regime and reducing the likelihood that it would pursue aggressive actions abroad, but the risks are high and it would be difficult for Western governments to directly increase the incidence or intensity of anti-regime activities in Russia.

Undermining Russia's image abroad would focus on diminishing Russian standing and influence, thus undercutting regime claims of restoring Russia to its former glory. Further sanctions, the removal of Russia from non-UN international forums, and boycotting such events as the World Cup could be implemented by Western states and would damage Russian prestige. But the extent to which these steps would damage Russian domestic stability is uncertain.

While none of these measures has a high probability of success, any or all of them would prey on the Russian regime's deepest anxieties and might be employed as a deterrent threat to diminish Russia's active disinformation and subversion campaigns abroad.

Muscovites protesting the war in Ukraine and Russia's support of separatism in the Crimea on the Circular Boulevards in Moscow on March 15, 2014.

Ideological and Informational Cost-Imposing Options	Likelihood of Success in Extending Russia	Benefits	Costs and Risks
Diminish faith in the Russian electoral system	Low	Moderate	High
Create the perception that the regime is not pursuing the public interest	Moderate	Moderate	High
Encourage domestic protests and other nonviolent resistance	Low	Moderate	High
Undermine Russia's image abroad	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

AIR AND SPACE COST-IMPOSING MEASURES

Reposturing bombers within easy striking range of key Russian strategic targets has a high likelihood of success and would certainly get Moscow's attention and raise Russian anxieties; the costs and risks of this option are low as long as the bombers are based out of range of most of Russia's theater ballistic and ground-based cruise missiles.

Reposturing fighters so that they are closer to their targets than bombers as a way to achieve higher sortie rates to compensate for their smaller payloads would likely concern Moscow even more than reposturing bombers, but the likelihood of success is low and risks are high. Because each aircraft would need to fly multiple sorties during a conventional conflict, Russian leaders would

Air and Space/Nuclear Cost-Imposing Options	Likelihood of Success in Extending Russia	Benefits	Costs and Risks
Option 1: Changing air and space force posture and operations			
Reposture bombers	High	Moderate	Low
Reposture fighters	Low	Moderate	High
Deploy additional tactical nuclear weapons	High	Low	High
Reposition U.S. and allied ballistic missile defense systems	Low	Low	Moderate
Option 2: Increasing aerospace research and development (R&D)			
Invest more in low-observable aircraft	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Invest more in autonomous or remotely piloted aircraft	High	Moderate	Moderate
Invest more in long-range strike aircraft and missiles	High	High	Moderate
Invest more in longer-range high-speed anti-radiation missiles (HARMs)	High	Moderate	Moderate
Invest more in new electronic warfare technologies	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Focus on long-range, precision-guided conventional missiles (e.g., conventional prompt global strike)	Moderate	Moderate	High
Focus on space-based weapons	Low	Moderate	High
Focus on "spaceplanes"	Low to moderate	Moderate	High
Focus on small satellites	Low	Moderate	High
Option 3: Increasing air and missile components of the nuclear triad			
Break out of the nuclear arms control regime	Low	Moderate	High

probably be confident that they could destroy many fighters on the ground and shut down their deployment airfields early on with few or no additions to their missile inventory.

Deploying additional tactical nuclear weapons to locations in Europe and Asia could heighten Russia's anxiety enough to significantly increase investments in its air defenses. In conjunction with the bomber option, it has a high likelihood of success, but deploying more such weapons might lead Moscow to react in ways contrary to U.S. and allied interests.

Repositioning U.S. and allied ballistic missile defense systems to better engage Russian ballistic missiles would also alarm Moscow but would likely be the least effective option because Russia could easily saturate current systems and any planned upgrades with a small percentage of its existing missile inventory, leaving many missiles still available to hold U.S. and allied targets at risk.

There are also ways to get Russia to extend itself in strategic competition. In terms of benefits, such developments would exploit Moscow's demonstrated fear of U.S. airpower capabilities and doctrines. Developing new low-observable, long-range bombers, or simply adding significantly more of types that are already available or programmed (B-2s and B-21s) would be worrisome for Moscow, as would developing autonomous or remotely piloted strike aircraft and producing them in high numbers. All options would likely incentivize Moscow to devote ever-greater resources to making its command and control systems harder, more mobile, and more redundant.

A key risk of these options is being drawn into arms races that result in cost-imposing strategies directed against the United States. For example, investing in ballistic missile defense systems and space-based weapons would alarm Moscow, but Russia could defend against such developments by taking measures that would probably be considerably cheaper than the costs of these systems to the United States.

Marines assigned to the Thunderbolts of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 251 remove a training AGM-88 HARM from an F/A-18C Hornet on the flight deck of the *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71).

As for likelihood of success, some options are good cost-imposing strategies, but some—such as investing more in HARMs or other electronic warfare technologies—are clearly better than others, and some approaches should be avoided, such as those that focus on space-based weapons or ballistic missile defense systems.

The United States might goad Russia into a costly arms race by breaking out of the nuclear arms control regime, but the benefits are unlikely to outweigh U.S. costs. The financial costs of a nuclear arms race would probably be as high for the United States as they would be for Russia, perhaps higher. But the more serious costs would be political and strategic.

MARITIME COST-IMPOSING MEASURES

A U.S. sailor aboard the guided missile destroyer USS *Mustin* (DDG 89) fires a torpedo at a simulated target during Valiant Shield 2014 in the Pacific Ocean September 18, 2014.

Increasing U.S. and allied naval force posture and presence in Russia's operating areas could force Russia to increase its naval investments, diverting investments from potentially more dangerous areas. But the size of investment required to reconstitute a true blue-water naval capability makes it unlikely that Russia could be compelled or enticed to do so.

Increasing naval R&D efforts would focus on developing new weapons that allow U.S. submarines to threaten a broader set of targets or enhance their ability to threaten Russian nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), which could impose anti-submarine warfare costs on Russia. There are limited risks, but success depends on being able to develop these capabilities and on whether they are sufficiently capable of influencing Russian expenditures.

Shifting nuclear posture toward SSBNs would entail increasing the percentage of the U.S. nuclear triad assigned to SSBNs by increasing the size of that fleet. While it might force Russia to invest in capabilities that can operate in a blue-water environment in two oceans and would reduce risks to U.S. strategic posture, the option is unlikely to entice Russia into changing its strategy and, thus, extending itself.

Checking the Black Sea buildup would involve deploying strengthened North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) anti-access and area denial over the Black Sea—perhaps in the form of long-range, land-based anti-ship missiles—to drive up the cost of defending Russian bases in Crimea and lower the benefit to Russia of having seized this area. Russia would certainly mount a vigorous diplomatic and informational campaign to dissuade coastal NATO and non-NATO states from participating. Also, operating in the Black Sea is politically and logistically more difficult for the U.S. Navy than the Russian Navy; it is also more dangerous for the former in a conflict.

Maritime Cost-Imposing Options	Likelihood of Success in Extending Russia	Benefits	Costs and Risks
Increase U.S. and allied naval force posture and presence	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Increase naval R&D efforts	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Shift nuclear posture toward SSBNs	Low	Low	Low
Check the Black Sea buildup	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

LAND AND MULTIDOMAIN COST-IMPOSING MEASURES

Increasing U.S. forces in Europe, increasing European NATO member ground capabilities, and deploying a large number of NATO forces on the Russian border would likely have only limited effects on extending Russia. All the options would enhance deterrence, but the risks vary. A general increase in NATO ground force capabilities in Europe—including closing European NATO member readiness gaps and increasing the number of U.S. forces stationed in traditional locations in Western Europe—would have limited risks. But large-scale deployments on Russia's borders would increase the risk of conflict with Russia, particularly if perceived as challenging Russia's position in eastern Ukraine, Belarus, or the Caucasus.

Increasing the size and frequency of NATO exercises in Europe may help to enhance readiness and deterrence, but it is unlikely to prompt a costly Russian response unless the exercises also send risky signals. Large-scale NATO exercises held near Russia's borders and exercises that practice counterattack or offensive scenarios could be perceived as showing the intent and willingness to consider offensive operations. For example, a NATO exercise simulating a counterattack to retake NATO territory lost to advancing Russian forces might look like an exercise to prepare for an invasion of a piece of Russian territory, such as Kaliningrad.

Developing but not deploying an intermediate-range missile could bring Russia back into conformity with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty but could also prompt an acceleration of Russian missile programs. Withdrawing from that treaty and building the missiles but not deploying them in Europe would add little to U.S. capabilities and would probably prompt Russia to deploy such missiles itself—and, perhaps, invest more in ballistic missile defense. Taking the further step of deploying the missiles to Europe, assuming that NATO allies were willing, would also almost certainly prompt a Russian response, potentially involving substantial resources, or at least the diversion of substantial resources from other defense spending, though it is hard to assess what share would be directed toward defensive capabilities versus offensive or retaliatory ones.

Incremental investments in new technologies to counter Russian air defenses and increase U.S. long-range fires could significantly improve defense and deterrence while compelling increased Russian investment in countermeasures. Investments in more-revolutionary, next-generation technologies could have even greater effects, given the Russian concerns about new physical principles, but depending on the capability, such investments could also risk strategic stability by threatening the Russian regime and leadership security in a crisis.

Land and Multidomain Cost-Imposing Options	Likelihood of Success in Extending Russia	Benefits	Costs and Risks
Option 1: Increasing U.S. and NATO land forces in Europe			
Increase U.S. forces in Europe	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Increase European NATO member ground capabilities	Low	High	Low
Deploy large number of NATO forces on the Russian border	Moderate	Moderate	High
Option 2: Increasing NATO exercises in Europe			
Increase the size of U.S participation	Low	Moderate	Moderate
Generate a mass mobilization of European NATO member forces	Low	High	Moderate
Hold exercises on Russia's borders	Moderate	Moderate	High
Hold exercises practicing counterattack or offensive scenarios	Moderate	Moderate	High
Option 3: Withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty			
Fund a missile development program without withdrawing	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Withdraw and build missiles but do not deploy to Europe	High	Low	Moderate
Withdraw, build missiles, and deploy to Europe	High	Moderate	High
Option 4: Investing in new capabilities to manipulate Russian risk perceptions			
Invest in incremental improvements in counter–anti-access and area denial capabilities (e.g., enhanced Army Tactical Missile Systems, advanced anti-radiation guided missiles)	High	Moderate	Moderate
Invest in revolutionary, swarm counter–anti-access and area denial capabilities	High	High	High
Invest in incremental improvements in counter–ground forces/fires (e.g., enhanced Javelin)	Low	Low	Low
Invest in revolutionary, unmanned ground forces/fires capabilities	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Invest in weapons based on "new physical principles" (e.g,. directed-energy counter–air-defense weapons)	Moderate	High	High

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ARMY

Exercise Artemis Strike was a German-led tactical live-fire exercise with live Patriot and Stinger missiles at the NATO Missile Firing Installation in Chania, Greece, from October 31 to November 9, 2017. More than 200 U.S. soldiers and approximately 650 German airmen participated in the realistic training within a combined construct, exercising the rigors associated with force projection and educating operators on their air missile defense systems.

The task of "extending Russia" need not fall primarily on the Army or even the U.S. armed forces as a whole. Indeed, the most promising ways to extend Russia—those with the highest benefit, the lowest risk, and greatest likelihood of success—likely fall outside the military domain. Russia is not seeking military parity with the United States and, thus, might simply choose not to respond to some U.S. military actions (e.g., shifts in naval presence); other U.S. military actions (e.g., posturing forces closer to Russia) could ultimately prove more costly to the United States than to Russia. Still, our findings have at least three major implications for the Army.

1 **The U.S. Army should rebuild its linguistic and analytical expertise on Russia.** Because Russia does pose a long-term threat, the Army needs to develop the human capital to engage in this strategic competition.

2 **The Army should consider investing and encouraging the other services to invest more in capabilities, such as Army Tactical Missile Systems, Indirect Fire Protection Capability Increment 2, longer-range anti-air defense, and other systems designed to counter Russian anti-access and area denial capabilities.** The Army also might consider spending some R&D resources on less-mature, more-futuristic systems (e.g., swarm unmanned aerial vehicles or remote combat vehicles). While these measures would likely be insufficient in themselves to greatly extend Russia, they would benefit U.S. deterrence efforts and could augment a broader whole-of-government policy.

3 **Even if the Army were not directly involved in extending Russia per se, it would play a key role in mitigating the possible blowback.** All the options to extend Russia incur some risk. As a result, enhancing U.S. deterrence posture in Europe and increasing U.S. military capabilities (e.g., an enhanced Javelin or active protection systems for Army vehicles) might need to go hand in hand with any move to extend Russia, as a way of hedging against the chance of tensions with Russia escalating into conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

The most-promising options to "extend Russia" are those that directly address its vulnerabilities, anxieties, and strengths, exploiting areas of weakness while undermining Russia's current advantages. In that regard, Russia's greatest vulnerability, in any competition with the United States, is its economy, which is comparatively small and highly dependent on energy exports. Russian leadership's greatest anxiety stems from the stability and durability of the regime, and Russia's greatest strengths are in the military and info-war realms. The table below draws from the earlier tables to identify the most-promising options.

Most of the options discussed, including those listed here, are in some sense escalatory, and most would likely prompt some Russian counterescalation. Thus, besides the specific risks associated with each option, there is additional risk attached to a generally intensified competition with a nuclear-armed adversary to consider. This means that every option must be deliberately planned and carefully calibrated to achieve the desired effect. Finally, although Russia will bear the cost of this increased competition less easily than the United States will, both sides will have to divert national resources from other purposes. Extending Russia for its own sake is not a sufficient basis in most cases to consider the options discussed here. Rather, the options must be considered in the broader context of national policy based on defense, deterrence, and—where U.S. and Russian interests align—cooperation.

Most-Promising Cost-Imposing Options	Likelihood of Success in Extending Russia	Benefits	Costs and Risks
Expand U.S. energy production	High	High	Low
Impose deeper trade and financial sanctions	High	High	High
Increase U.S. and allied naval force posture and presence	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Reposture bombers	High	Moderate	Low
Invest more in autonomous or remotely piloted aircraft	High	Moderate	Moderate
Invest more in long-range strike aircraft and missiles	High	High	Moderate
Invest more in longer-range HARMs	High	Moderate	Moderate
Invest more in new electronic warfare technologies	Moderate	Moderate	Low

This brief describes work done in the RAND Arroyo Center documented in *Extending Russia: Competing from Advantageous Ground,* by James Dobbins, Raphael S. Cohen, Nathan Chandler, Bryan Frederick, Edward Geist, Paul DeLuca, Forrest E. Morgan, Howard J. Shatz, and Brent Williams, RR-3063-A, 2019 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR3063). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB10014. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights: This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited. Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please visit www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.

Image sources: Cover: mnn/Adobe Stock | Page 2: DIMUSE/Getty Images | Page 4: Sgt. Mitchell Ryan/DoD | Page 5: Dmitry Vereshchagin/Adobe Stock | Page 7: Anthony N. Hilkowski/DVIDS | Page 8: Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Declan Barnes/DVIDS | Page 9: Sgt. Derrick Irions/Flickr | Page 11: Anthony Sweeney/DVIDS.

www.rand.org

© RAND 2019
RB-10014-A (2019)